

Culture + Feminisation + Community = NEW CULTURE OF NEW POLITICS

By Shelagh Wright and Peter Jenkinson

“The fundamental change in the relationship between movements and administration is the centrepiece of the new municipalism. Movements are striving to become the main actors of change in cities.” Cambiano Messina dal Basso

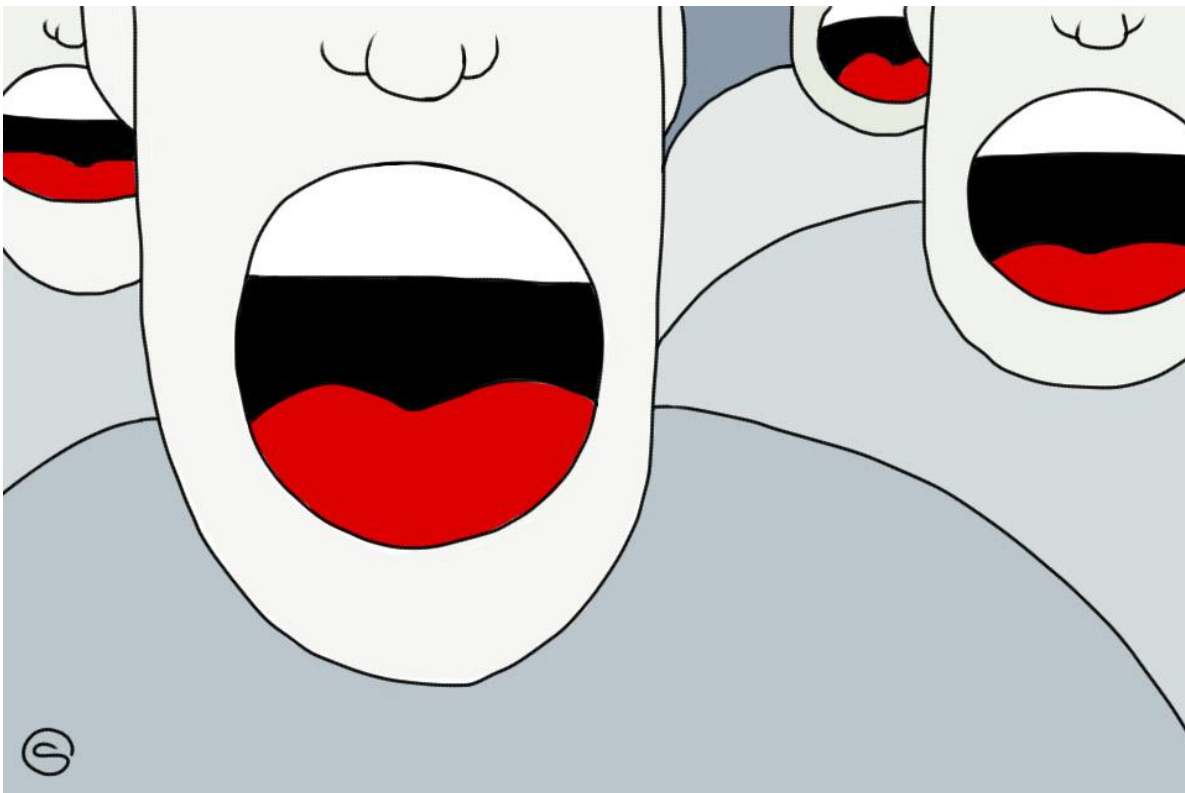
What is clear from the outset is that municipalism proposes a radical shift both in how politics is done and in who ‘does politics’. It foregrounds a more participatory and democratic political culture and an emancipatory political structure, with citizens moving closer to the centre of policy formation and decision making and with city administrations working to safeguard and strengthen The Commons. Rather than marginalising social movements, civil organisations, creative agencies, cultural activists and spirited citizens located far beyond the City Hall, the new municipalism, in a determined spirit of not leaving politics to politicians alone, invites unprecedented levels of co-creation, cooperation, collaboration, coalition and co-governance with people and publics of all kinds.

One of the most distinctive dimensions of the municipalist movement is the feminisation of politics which challenges orthodox notions of what precisely is considered to be ‘political’ and who politicians are and might become. This proposed shift is not just concerned with the greater inclusion of women in politics at all stages and on all levels, although this remains critical and urgent wherever you are across the world. In parallel it also questions who has the right to speak and who doesn’t, makes generous and safe space for marginalised voices and perspectives to be expressed and collaboratively builds bold social solidarities and unexpected solutions to time-worn ‘problems’. It rejects more traditional conceptions and practices of political ‘leadership’, and prevailing political cultures, in which aggression, competition, exclusivity, certainty and over-confident personal ambition prevail.

Refreshingly, in contrast to endemic machismo, this emerging feminised political culture is determinedly values-based and proposes a more open, experimental and discursive spirit of collaboration: one in which, as ‘normal’ people, it is possible to express doubts, anxieties, vulnerabilities, confusions and contradictions without fear of retribution. It strives constantly to reach out for unconventional conversations, alliances and relationships far beyond the ingrained, fortified and, increasingly professionalised ‘political class’ that consistently sidelines, censors and silences voices other than its own.

Vitality, this more permeable feminised political culture accommodates and accelerates the essential role that both culture - understood in its broadest sense as people's lived realities, values and capabilities - and communities together have to play in the practice of an emboldened politics of the common good and of 'The Commons'. And in parallel a politics of care and empathy. As a result, this new form of political culture is not machine-like but deeply human, bringing together the personal and the collective with the political, in an enriched, participatory, polycentric and sustainable politics.

Cambiamo Messina dal Basso (CMdB): Let's change Messina from the bottom up



Cambiamo Messina dal Basso (CMdB) is a civic-political movement, consisting of local citizens, cultural and social and environmentalist associations, left-wing parties and movements collectively focussed on increasing political participation and the creation of a political platform based on the commons and not on a narrow and fixed political manifesto. Building upon the movement's previous experiences and multiple campaigns, CMdB emerged in early 2013 with intention to run for local elections though with very little hope of success, given that the city had a history of extremely low engagement in conventional politics and very low turnout at elections, in a community scourged, over generations, by organised crime, racketeering, corruption and misrule,

from its streets to the highest levels of society and politics, and a community impoverished yet further by the comprehensive imposition of austerity.

Unexpectedly then, in June 2013 CMdB won the elections, becoming the first civic-political municipalist movement to run a major city in Italy. Their victory kick-started a bold five-year experiment in shifting the way that politics is carried out: to put it simply, politics not from the top-down but determinedly from the bottom-up: the 'Under Power' in the DNA of municipalist movements around the world. This was seen to be the only way to change the city, igniting the rich and broad, yet normally under-valued and excluded, human assets and creative capabilities of sidelined citizens in the process of this intended fundamental change.

In one of his first acts in reaching City Hall the new Mayor Renato Accorinti, declaring "we are all mayors" and "this is your house", had the security barriers at the building's entrances removed as a visual and physical signal of the intended opening up of the normally-fortified institution to the citizens. Soon after the elections, in an unprecedented act - and in parallel a further signal of changes to come - Popular



The participants of the European Cultural Challenge, May 2018 Amsterdam, with in the front Igor Igor Stokfiszewski, holding a sign pledging support for the re-election of the municipalist government in the city of Messina

Assemblies were organised in neighbourhoods bringing together people who had previously little experience of politics to discuss issues of deep personal concern to them, their families and their neighbourhoods. Many of those attending had not had any direct contact with the administration or elected officials, with those 'in power', ever before.

Simultaneously the multi-disciplinary 'Messina Laboratory for the Commons and the Participatory Institutions', facilitated by CMdB member and Deputy Mayor for Culture, Federico Alagna, was created: a citizens' forum, as a "collective expert for the Administration", charged with the task of exploring the implementation of participatory budgeting, drafting regulations on the shared use of the commons and promoting civic participation tools. In other fields, CMdB took a wide range of very practical actions of

everyday benefit to citizens: they reduced abusive urban speculation, encouraged community-led actions such as the cleaning up of parks and civic spaces, promoted territorial safeguards, waste sorting passed from 4% to 12%, a record for Messina, and kerbside collections were introduced into some neighbourhoods with a high level of take up, . In addition the the city's main theatre was reopened - which had previously been shut down due to lack of funds - as a civic gathering point. And processes started for the 'stabilisation' of the municipality's temporary workers and creating housing for homeless people. For Mayor Accorinti the priority was "putting politics at the service of the common good and giving back to the city what belongs to it".

After five years CMdB lost in the Messina elections of June 2018 but this disappointment has not in any way dimmed their values, convictions or energies. They see it as "an electoral loss but not a political loss" and recognise that, as a collective movement, they have learned so much, both positive and negative, during their years 'in power'. The key learning is that a fundamentally transformative politics cannot come about without deep and sustained immersion in, and re-ignition of, the culture and cultures of a place. And that leadership has to be inclusive, shared and constantly negotiated rather than imposed, but also that, with pressure to 'deliver', and quickly, and to deal with unforeseen emergencies, things are never as easy as they sound. In order to avoid the 'local trap', of being an isolated, inward-facing, selfish and parochial island of autonomy, it is vital to build multiple connections outwards and contribute to the creation of a new politics of networked, generous, translocal power. There are and always will be tensions, and at times open conflict, between being in a movement and being in administration with all its in-built constraints and time-honoured hierarchies, procedures and delaying mechanisms - and, for those most closely involved, progress was often achieved at great personal cost - yet simultaneously, the freer, more creative and more open approaches of the movement proved to be very effective in countering a political system that inherently resists dynamism, spontaneity and risk.

For Frederico Alagna losing the elections "...is but the end of a cycle. It is the beginning of a new challenge, of a new way of interpreting the relationship between our movement and the governance of the city". Consequently, rather than becoming dispirited, CMdB feel strongly today that, collectively and building on what they have learned through being 'in power', they will continue to have a lot to say and, critically to do, in terms of their city and the ongoing close involvement of Messinese citizens in long-term conversations and decision-making. This remains the most distinctive and significant aspect of this movement-driven municipalism.